भारत को शामिल करके पूर्वी क्षेत्र में "मुक्त व्यापार क्षेत्र" स्थापित करने का विचार रखती है;

(ख) यदि हां, तो तत्संबंधी ब्यौरा क्या है; और

(ग) सरकार ने इस संबंध में क्या कदम उठाए है?

वाणिज्य मंत्री (श्री रामकृष्ण हेगड़े) : (क) से (ग) जी, नही। तथापि, सार्क के सदस्य देशों नामतः बंगला देश, भूटान, नेपाल, भारत, श्रीलंका, मालदीव और पाकिस्तान ने दक्षिण एशिया क्षेत्र में एक मुक्त व्यापार क्षेत्र की स्थापना के बारे में सहमति व्यक्त की है। इस संबंध में करार सन 2001 तक निष्पादित किए जाने की संभावना है।

Linking of Trade Regulations with Environmental Issues

804. SHRI PREM CHAND GUPTA: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the WTO has linked trade regulations with environmental issues in order to impose their own environmental standard on other countries; and

(b) if so, how do Government plan to counter this?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) and (b) WTO Agreements do not impose environmental standards in the conduct of trade among countries. However, as a general exception, WTO Members may take measures necessary to protect human, animal or plant life or health, or measures relating to the conservation of exhaustible natural resources if such measures are made effective in conjunction with restrictions on domestic production or consumption. Such measures cannot be applied in an arbitrary or discriminatory manner or as disguised restrictions on international trade.

Government is actively participating in the WTO discussions on the relationship between trade and environment. Recently, trade restrictions imposed by another WTO Member for environmental purposes were sucessfully challenged by India in the WTO Dispute Settlement Mechanism.

Assessment of Loss by Tobacco Board

805. SHRI YERRA NARAYANASWAMY: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state: -

(a) whether Tobacco Board made any assessment of the potential crop loss in 1998-99 in Andhra Pradesh due to untimely rains and floods;

(b) if so, what is the expected crop yield;

(c) whether it is a fact that tobacco farmers have suffered loss of nurseries; and

(d) what financial assistance is recommended by the Tobacco Board to tobacco farmers in Andhra Pradesh?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) Yes. Sir.

(b) The crap yield is expected to be more or less normal.

(c) Yes, Sir.

(d) Tobacco Board has recommended grant of assistance to tobacco farmers in Andhra Pradesh.

Inquiry into the Conduct of STC Officials

806. SHRI GOVINDRAM MIRI: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether the CBI is looking into the conduct of senior STC officials in urea import deal this year;

(b) who are the accused officials of STC;

(c) whether it is a fact that two STC Directors refused to sign the contracts suspecting foul play in the deals;

(d) whether the CBI is trying to protect the guilty by diluting the charges; and

(e) what action Government are taking to ensure fair investigation so that guilty persons are not spared?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) to (e) In 1997, STC's role in urea deal was scrutinized by CBI who after discreet verification have closed the ease.

Challenge to Patenting of Basmati

807. SHRI AMAR SINGH: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government's attention has been drawn to the news-item appear ing in the Economic Times, dated 10th September, 1998, under the caption "Pak ditches India in battle of basmati";

(b) if so, the details thereof;

(c) what is Government's reaction in regard thereto: and

(d) what are the reasons for not taking any step to challenge the basmati patent granted to U.S. company, Rice Tec. Inc.?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) to (c) The news-item in brief states that "Pakistan has decided not to. join forces with India in fighting the basmati patent granted to US company Rice Tec Inc, and instead is challenging it independently in the US Patent Office". According to the available information Pakistan had not filed an appeal against the patent granted to Ricetec. However, Pakistan had formally sent a letter protesting to the US Patent and Trade Mark Office against the grant of the patent to Ricetec and have reserved the right to challenge the issue of the patent.

(d) Patents are granted by respective Governments under their Patents laws. Whenever information is received about patents being taken on certain products which are of commercial interest to India and which in our views do not satisfy the criteria of patentability, steps are taken to assess whether the grant of patent can be challenged. After sufficient material is gathered, steps are taken for filing a petition for re-examination and ultimate revocation of patent in that country.

Export of Onions and Potatoes

808. SHRI SITARAM KESRI: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether India has been exporting onions and potatoes;

(b) if so, since when;

(c) whether the import of these items has been lifted;

(d) if so, since when and whether these items have been put under OGL; and

(e) if so, since when and the reasons therefor?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) and (b) Yes, Sir. While the exports of onion from India had been taking place even before independence, the exports of potatoes started from 1957-58.

(c) to (e) In order to augment the domestic availability of onion and arrest its rising prices, imports of onion have been freely permitted with effect from 15th October, 1998. As regards import policy for potatoes, these are in the restricted list of imports and can .be imported only against a licence or in accordance with public notice issued by the Office of DGFT in this regard.

Textile and Leather Exports

809. SHRI K.M. KHAN: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether India's textile and leather exports to Germany were hit hard in the first half of calender year 1998;

(b) if .so, the reasons therefor;

(c) whether Government propose to take some steps ensuring no further downward trend in export of textiles and